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From: Kraft, Andrew [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=4A94A4F199B247778ABB02285A51B927-KRAFT, ANDREW]
Sent: 3/21/2019 6:26:27 PM
To: Personal Matters / Ex. 6 [/o=ExchangeLabs/ou=Exchange Administrative Group (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/cn=Recipients/cn=4ecbeee669fb44b1acd3baa7ad974f10-smorriskraft@gmail.com]
Subject: FW: POLITICO --EPA move puts formaldehyde safety in hands of ex-industry official

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EPA move puts formaldehyde safety in hands of ex-industry official

By Annie Snider

03/21/2019 05:00 AM EDT

The Trump administration is putting research on the health dangers of formaldehyde in the hands of a former chemicals industry official who has worked to enshrine industry's perspective on chemicals' safety even as EPA blocks the release of a study by scientists showing the chemical can cause cancer at extremely low levels of exposure.

EPA said on Wednesday it planned to add formaldehyde to its priority list for evaluation under the country's primary chemical safety law. If finalized, that move would start a new years-long review process that public health advocates say would emphasize industry-funded research and discount independent studies looking at the chemical's effects on human health.

The proposal has raised concerns because a major health assessment of formaldehyde drafted by another division of the agency has been blocked from release by Trump administration officials for a year and a half. POLITICO reported last year that the assessment from EPA's Integrated Risk Information System links the chemical with cancers, including leukemia. That assessment has been fiercely criticized by the chemicals industry, which uses formaldehyde in everything from furniture to cosmetics to fertilizer.

An EPA spokesperson declined to answer questions about the status of the IRIS assessment and whether a new review by the agency's toxics program would supplant it. While IRIS assessments are designed to provide scientific information about chemicals' risks to all of EPA's regulatory programs, as well as states and other governments, a review by the toxics program would be of use only to that EPA office.

In a statement, EPA's top chemical safety official said the IRIS assessment will not be disregarded if the agency moves forward with reviewing formaldehyde under the Toxic Substances Control Act, or TSCA, including in any usage limits it may impose.

"In fact, the work done for IRIS will inform the TSCA process. By using our TSCA authority, EPA will be able to take regulatory steps; IRIS does not have this authority," said Alexandra Dunn, assistant administrator for EPA's Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention.

Democratic lawmakers, who have for months been pressuring the Trump administration to immediately release the IRIS assessment, said the two efforts should not be mutually exclusive.

"Taking regulatory action against formaldehyde under TSCA is critical, but it should not replace the EPA's effort to finalize and publicize its near-complete scientific review of the chemical under IRIS," Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) said in a statement.

At the center of the Trump administration's work on formaldehyde are two political officials who came to EPA directly from chemical industry groups with a stake in the long-running fight over formaldehyde's dangers.

David Dunlap, who is now the top political official at EPA's Office of Research and Development, was until August a high-level chemicals expert for Koch Industries, whose subsidiary, Georgia-Pacific LLC, is one of the country's largest producers of formaldehyde.

Under his ethics agreement, Dunlap voluntarily recused himself from work on formaldehyde. But that agreement wasn't signed until two and a half months after he began working at the agency — and after he had directed the heads of EPA's program offices to limit the number of chemicals they asked IRIS to study, according to a Government Accountability Office report and documents obtained by Senate Democrats. That request resulted in formaldehyde being dropped from the program's priorities in a document that was published on December 19, the same day that Dunlap's ethics paperwork was dated.

Another EPA official, Nancy Beck, a former top expert for the chemicals industry's top lobbying group, the American Chemistry Council, has been laying the groundwork for a more industry-friendly approach to reviewing chemicals under the Toxic Substances Control Act since becoming the No. 2 political official in EPA's chemical safety office in 2017.

A key component of the effort is a complex set of rules released last summer laying out how EPA's TSCA program is to assess the range of sometimes conflicting scientific studies on a chemical to determine whether it poses a danger.

Those rules, crafted by Beck, have raised alarm among environmental groups who say they will elevate industry-backed research and limit the use of studies looking at the effects of chemicals on human health.

In comments on the rules, 20 public health groups said the document was "less about evaluating the quality of evidence, and more about eliminating it altogether."

The TSCA program's procedures for reviewing scientific evidence differ greatly from the IRIS program's rules, which have been endorsed by the National Academies of Sciences. The Trump administration committed in January to having the academies review the TSCA rules, but has not yet submitted them. A spokesperson said the agency has started discussions with the academies to inform next steps.

Watchdogs fear that the Trump administration is shifting work on formaldehyde to the EPA toxics office in order to procure an assessment of the chemical that downplays the health risks identified in the IRIS assessment.

"The reason this is happening now, I believe, is so that the assessment can be taken out of the career science office and the career scientists that had been overseeing it to date, and put it into the hands of a conflicted political appointee who can work her magic to make risks go away," said Richard Denison, lead senior scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund.

The American Chemistry Council, Beck's former employer, which has pushed back strongly on the IRIS study of formaldehyde, on Wednesday welcomed a review of formaldehyde under the TSCA program.

"The [ACC Formaldehyde] Panel fully supports a risk review of the uses of formaldehyde chemistry by means of transparent science-based standards that include a weight-of-evidence approach and consider the best-available science to draw conclusions," Kimberly White, a senior director at ACC who was appointed by former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt to EPA's Scientific Advisory Board, said in a statement.

The IRIS assessment, which has been in the works for more than two decades, has been slowed a number of times amid opposition from the chemicals industry and congressional Republicans. In 2004, even after the National Cancer Institute had issued preliminary findings linking the chemical with leukemia, Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) convinced EPA to delay its release. Current EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler was on Inhofe's staff at the time.

In a statement to POLITICO, Sen. Tom Carper, the top Democrat on the Environment and Public Works Committee, said Wednesday's decision by EPA "is just another delay."

"I continue to call on EPA to act in the public interest and to stop wasting taxpayer dollars by working to immediately review, finalize and publish the formaldehyde report instead of kicking the can even further down the road," he said.